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Integrating listening and speaking skills to facilitate English language learners' communicative competence

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Abstract

Listening and speaking skills co-occur in real-life discourse and they are not mutually exclusive. Within this framework, this study is conducted to prove that teaching listening and speaking skills in integration improves oral communicative competence of the students. In order to collect data for the study, a pre-post test and various tasks were designed for 180 students from the preparatory school of Hacettepe University, Turkey. The collected data was analyzed through t-test. At the end of the study, the group practicing the skills in integration was found to be more successful than the group practicing the skills separately.

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Keywords: Listening skill; Speaking skill; Communicative competence; Integrated skills

1. Introduction

In real-life communication, people use a variety of language skills – listening, speaking, reading, and writing. “When people learn a foreign language, they usually want to make use of that language to communicate with people who speak the same language. They can find themselves in the need of understanding them and talking to them. 201). As Raimes (1983) states, “listening and speaking are, regardless of who the people using the language are, at least as important as the other skills to communicate”. Byrne (1991) states that “one should keep in mind that these skills are normally integrated in real life” (p.21). The term integrated skills is frequently used as if it were almost synonymous with reinforcement. Viewed in this way, the process of integrating language skills involves linking them together in such a way that what has been learnt and practiced through the exercise of one skill is reinforced and perhaps extended through further language tasks which bring different skills into use. Here, the use of any skill may quite naturally lead to the use of other.

It is essential for students to understand the language they are exposed to and to respond appropriately so that they can become competent users of that particular language. Seferoğlu and Uzakgöre (2004) claim that “listening is usually an interactive process” (p. 2). The listener does not always just listen to, but she or he also reacts to the speaker or asks questions for clarification. The most essential issue for the students should be to understand what they are listening to and to be able to give appropriate responses orally. This aim brings us to the integration of listening and speaking while teaching, as our main consideration should be not only learning the grammar of the target language but also communicating in that language, which highlights the importance of the integration of these

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two skills. As a result, it may be said that the more the skills are taught individually, the less communication will take place in the classroom. To avoid this, the skills should be taught in integration to guide learners to develop their oral communicative competencies.

Dell Hymes (1971) defined communicative competence as a term in linguistics which refers to a language user's grammatical knowledge of syntax, morphology, phonology and the like, as well as social knowledge about how and when to use utterances appropriately. Within this process, communicative competence is a way of describing what a language speaker knows which enables him or her to interact effectively with others. Therefore, teachers should give more importance to teaching of the skills in integration in order to encourage the individuals become communicatively competent.

Speaking and listening skills have been regarded as being too difficult to cope with ,so generally students are not willing to participate in tasks focusing on these two skills. When they are integrated through information-gap tasks, students might see the actual outcome and become more willing to practice to achieve more success in communicating their ideas. Some instructors do not prefer information-gap tasks thinking that the class may get out of control which may cause barriers in communication process. Teachers should sweep away the boundaries and create a safe stress-free environment to encourage and motivate the students to speak. An information-gap task is a task where learners have the lack of the needed information to complete a task and they are in need of listening or speaking to each other in order to complete the task as in real- life. Information gap tasks are beneficial in a foreign language setting for various reasons. To start with, they both enhance the opportunity of speaking practice and highlight the real communication, therefore; the motivation of the students is high. One of the challenges that teachers meet in the classroom is motivating the students to speak in the target language. Active and confident students always participate, but the others who are less confident are not willing to speak. As Lightbown and Spada (2006) suggest “speaking in the target language requires more than one mental task at one time like choosing words, pronouncing them, and stringing them together with the appropriate grammatical markers” (p. 39). In order to perform these operations while communicating, complex and nonspontaneous mental operations are required and failure to do so may lead to reticence, self-consciousness, fear, or even panic, similarly with respect to listening. “The instructor should be the facilitator in the classroom to create an unthreatening environment”.(Jones, 2004, p. 34). Hence, another important feature of information-gap tasks is that each student has only part of the information they need to complete a task, so they must cooperate and share their information by speaking or listening to each other. Within this framework, in the learning process the students talk to one another, not exclusively to the teacher, which provides the involvement of all students into the tasks while at the same time fostering student-centered learning in the classroom

In real life, listening and speaking are always in integration, so teachers should teach these two skills in an interacted way. Although the students may know how to listen and speak in the language, they may still not be able to communicate in this language mainly because these skills are not used in integration. Use of authentic materials and real life situations could naturally lead to the integration of skills since this is the case in real life. The aim of this study is to prove that listening and speaking both in practice phase in the classroom and in real communication situations entail unique features that result in real contributions to overall language learning. It is the teacher's task to comprehend and make use of how closely listening is related to the speaking skill and how listening can be integrated with speaking through information-gap tasks. This study focuses on and sets forth the scientific view of teaching listening and speaking in integration through information-gap tasks.

Integration of skills exposes English language learners to authentic language and challenges them to interact naturally in the language. By this way, English becomes a real means of interaction and sharing among people. In addition to this, it allows the teacher to color his/her lesson with varieties because the range of tasks is wider. “Real success in English teaching and learning is when the learners can actually communicate in English inside and outside the classroom” (Davies and Pearse, 2000, p. 99)

With these in mind, this study aims at answering the question whether teaching listening and speaking skills in integration improves oral communicative competence of the students.

2. Method

2.1. Subjects

For this study, tasks and pre-post tests have been administered to 180 students from the preparatory classes of Hacettepe University. They are chosen at random and are all pre-intermediate level students between the ages of 17 and 19 who have graduated from government schools. The course book, they are studying in their English classes is “English File”. They have started learning English with “English File Elementary” and have gone as with the other levels of the same book. First, the pre test was administered to all participants. Then, ninety of these students practiced fifteen listening and fifteen speaking tasks which were taught separately. Each day one of these tasks was carried out in the class. In the meantime, the other ninety students were busy with the thirty tasks which were based on the integration of the listening and speaking skills through information gap tasks. Subsequently all the students were given exactly the same test as the post test.

The tasks and the tests have been carried out in the fall semester of the 2008-2009 academic year. The post test was applied to the students just after they had completed the tasks. This, of course, increases the reliability of the test results since it was held when the effects of the tasks were still fresh.

2.1.1. Instruments

2.1.2. Pre- Post Tests

All of the participants chosen for this study are all of the same level of proficiency, which makes the test results more reliable. It would be impossible to work with students at various levels of proficiency because different levels of proficiency would require different tests and tasks to arrive at reliable results. The base lines of the students were determined by the pre-test and the students who are at the same level were chosen randomly. To reach reliable and valid results the pre and the post tests were the same communicative test. Chastain (1988) mentions that “a communicative test aims at developing valid, reliable and practical means of evaluating students’ ability to communicate” (p. 393). Students were expected to demonstrate the ability to perform skills similar to those they had performed in class. These tasks were practically the same as those practiced in the real language portions of the class hour. The students talked about the items in the listening text and were able to relate the content to their own lives.

Before administering the pre-post tests, a pilot study was carried out. It was applied to twenty students apart from the participants of the main study as it was not possible to administer the same test again to the participants of the pilot study. The participants of the pilot study were from Hacettepe University preparatory school and they were all chosen randomly. The pilot study aims at finding out whether all the items are clear and understandable to make the factor analysis, and see if there are any irrelevant questions and also to see if they are categorized in the right place and to find out whether the test is reliable or not. The Cronbach’s alpha value is 0.80, so the result of the pilot study reflected the reliability of the test which reinforces the validity, as well.

2.1.3. Tasks

All the tasks involved in the study were information-gap tasks. As Krashen (1985) pinpoints, “learners are exposed to language only in the classroom where they spend less time in contact with the language, covering a smaller discourse type” (p. 46). The limited exposure to the target language and lack of opportunities to practice speaking do not let the communicative abilities of learners fully develop and result into embarrassment and stress for them, so the teachers should use real life materials through information-gap tasks to increase the motivation of the students. Errors in social settings are mostly overlooked if they do not interfere with the meaning because people consider it and face-threatening to interrupt and correct somebody who is trying to have a conversation with them. Interlocutors only react to an error if they cannot understand the speech and try to adjust their speech with the speaker in their effort to negotiate for meaning. It is mostly the classroom environment where feedback on error is

provided; this leads many learners to frustration. In this study, during the implementation process, teachers just reacted to an error if they couldn't get the meaning as the aim of these tasks is developing communication skills of the students.

The tasks given to the first group were mainly focusing on listening and speaking separately, however; the tasks developed for the other group involve the integration of these two skills. As is mentioned before, all of them were developed through information-gap tasks. They were adapted to be carried out separately and integratively. Later, these tasks were ordered so that students could move from sentence level to paragraph level. The aim of preparing the tasks in this order is to make students familiar with the skills before asking them to do more complicated ones. Moreover, to activate participation in the classroom, it was ensured that students were provided friendly, informal and learning-supportive environments. This was obtained by teachers' friendly, helpful and cooperative behavior while the students were dealing with a task. In order to reinforce students, the tasks provide reasonable commitments for successful language learning. When the teachers said that the lesson would be about listening or speaking, most of the students did not want to be involved as they believed at first that it would be difficult. So, the first tasks were just a small warmer to motivate the students before going on with the more challenging ones. By the end of the first tasks, the students seemed to be more willing to participate in the other ones and they became more familiar with the skills. During the following tasks, it was observed that students did not feel anxious anymore about forming sentences while speaking or listening. Generally most of the tasks were autonomous as there were student-students or students-student interaction. There was an information-gap between the students so they were communicative tasks. People need this kind of information in real life, which fosters student involvement in the classroom. All through these tasks the students had the opportunity of working together and they were very active which supported the authentic atmosphere of learning. The tasks were ordered from the controlled to free ones in order to guide students but later on they became more autonomous. The tasks not only considered these two skills but also covered practicing the sub skills such as listening for the main idea, listening for the detailed information, predicting and comprehending. Generally the tasks took 20 or 30 minutes to complete in the actual classroom setting.

In parallel with the aims of the study, integration of the skills accustoms the learners to combining listening and speaking, in natural interaction through information-gap tasks.

2.2. Data Analysis

In order to compare the results of the same test given to both groups, the t-test technique was used for two independent samples. But this technique requires a sample feature which is normally distributed. Therefore, it was necessary to study the distributions of these two samples first and see whether their distribution were normal or not. If they were not normal, nonparametric tests to compare these samples could be used, however; the analysis made reflected that t-test would be applicable for the interpretation of the test administered to the two groups.

The mean (arithmetic average of the n values) of the two samples are 61.51 and 50.86 respectively. The group practicing the tasks in integration seems to receive higher values than the other.

The test results of both of the groups are normally distributed (for the significance level of 0.05 or 0.01). Therefore, the t-test technique could be used for the two independent samples.

Independent samples t-test is Levene's test for equality of variances. According to the value of significance which is 0.470, it can be concluded that these two samples have equal variances (for the significance level of 0.05 or 0.010). Considering the value of significance 0.008, it can be said that these two samples do not have equal means. It is found that the t-test value is 0.008 which is less than our significance level 0.05. Therefore, it can be concluded that the two sample distributions are not the same.

Table 1. Group Statistics

	N	Mean	Std.Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Integrated	90	61.51	12,80	2,86
Not-integrated	90	50.86	12,21	2,43

As can be seen in Table 1, the mean value of the integrated group is more than the non-integrated group, so it can be said that listening and speaking tasks in integration through information-gap tasks make students more successful than they can be when these skills are taught separately.

3. Conclusion

People listen or speak in order to obtain the presented information or to learn about a content which is intellectual rather than factual as a way of developing their own intellectual skills so that ideas can be more effectively manipulated, possibly with the aim of influencing the behavior of others, or of determining the outcome of a series of operations. These reasons for listening and speaking are essentially practical. Thus, it can be said that listening is carried out for many purposes other than listening to the language itself. Just as messages are listened in order to be able to do something else, the student speaking a foreign language should be less concerned with the language than with the message sent to communicate. Therefore, students should develop not only listening but also speaking skills in order to communicate with others.

For some time in language teaching, it has been conventional to teach speaking as being of primary importance, regarding listening to be less important although it is known that oral skills and aural skills cannot be separated from each other. Language teachers should encourage students to predict, to tolerate ambiguity and to link ideas so that they stop dwelling on isolated words often not vital for comprehension. To facilitate communicative competence the teachers can also help students by discussing the title, theme, and cultural background before starting the tasks. While choosing the tasks, all types of materials from advertisements to literature can be used. In the first language, students have ready access to language used in meaningful contexts, and they incorporate needed patterns from those models into their own changing and evolving the linguistic system. What they often lack in the second foreign language classroom is the opportunity to develop a sufficient language base from which to generate messages they would like to communicate. Classroom use of comprehensible materials can help to alleviate this problem. Thus, all tasks should serve to facilitate communicative fluency in each of the other language skills including listening and speaking. The students can speak at a much higher level of proficiency than in the past when the preoccupation with grammar is used to deprive them of the opportunity to speak for the meaning. Besides these, information-gap tasks increase students' motivation and improve their level of comprehension.

Within the framework of this study, it was realized that the students were willing to participate in the tasks as the two skills were presented in integration through information-gap tasks, which created real life situations in the classroom. Listening is a receptive skill in that the listener is receiving a message from a speaker, but it shouldn't mean that the listener is passive during a listening task. The listening process, in a way, is a very active process as the listener needs to use background knowledge to understand the intended message of the speaker; so, the listeners should deal with various tasks while listening to activate their schemata. The follow-up of these stages can easily be the production stage, which inevitably means the integration of skills. Hence, teaching the skills separately will influence negatively the communication in the classroom; therefore, the teachers should create real life situations not only by integrating listening and speaking skills but also by implementing information-gap tasks to enhance real communication among the individuals.

In conclusion, it is seen that the results of the test show that students' success increases when these two skills are taught in integration through information-gap tasks. Moreover, practicing the skills through information-gap tasks carry up student involvement and motivation mainly because these kinds of tasks are related to real life and thus leads to communication. It may be said that the listening and speaking skills are at least as important as the reading and writing skills. This study suggests that students' success rises when listening and speaking skills are integrated through information-gap tasks.

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